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SUBJECT: Perceptions of President Obama, as Reflected in the
Brazilian Press

REF: 08 Brasilia 1479

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: In Brazil, there is a great deal of public and media interest in President Barack Obama, going back to his emergence as the Democratic frontrunner in the middle stages of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Obama's electoral victory and inauguration were covered very positively by the Brazilian media, which welcomed the prospect of "change" from the perceived unilateralist and excessively militaristic policies of the previous administration. The election of the first African-American U.S. president also captured the imagination of the Brazilian public. Despite concerns about protectionist measures in the recently passed U.S. economic stimulus bill and the possibility that Brazil might be sidelined as a U.S. priority by Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East, press coverage and public opinion of President Obama remain highly favorable. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) Brazil's considerable interest in President Barack Obama, as reflected in media coverage, dates back to the middle stages of the 2008 presidential campaign when then-Senator Obama emerged as the frontrunner for the nomination of the Democratic Party. During the general election campaign, statements by Obama and his Republican opponent, John McCain, made constant headlines in the Brazilian press, which devoted a great deal of attention to the U.S. elections.

¶3. (U) Obama's assertions during the campaign that he would re-examine trade agreements signed by the United States and McCain's claims in favor of Brazilian ethanol immediately reinforced the general Brazilian perception that Democrats have a tendency to be more protectionist than Republicans. However, the overall rejection of the Bush administration by the Brazilian elites and Obama's early identification in the campaign as a candidate who would bring "change" on issues like perceived U.S. unilateralism soon resulted in very positive coverage for the Democratic candidate.

¶4. (U) Brazilian press references to Obama's victory in the election were very positive and celebratory opinion pieces were quite common. ("Obama will bring to the American presidency a new multilateral vision of the world," wrote prominent columnist Merval Pereira in a not-atypical piece). Brazilian opinion makers celebrated what they saw as the U.S. rejection of Bush administration policies and rejoiced over the election of the first African-American president. Media highlighted President Lula's comparisons of his own background and rise through politics to those of President Obama, suggesting that this shared experience should provide an important basis for a strong relationship.

¶5. (U) Initial expectations for the new U.S. president were high throughout Brazil, including at the highest levels of the Brazilian government. Shortly after Obama's inauguration, President Lula said during one of his weekly radio addresses that he believed that President Obama would change the "mistaken [U.S.] policy for Latin America." According to the national daily O Globo, Lula noted that the United States had participated in military coups in the region during the 1960s and '70s, adding, "I think that now Obama can look

at Latin America with a democratic eye." There was also much speculation and hope that Obama would make a gesture of some sort towards Cuba.

¶16. (U) Beyond the celebration, many Brazilian press analyses expressed concern that a severe economic downturn, the U.S. military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and the overall security concerns in the Middle East would consume all of the new administration's attention, leaving little for Latin America and Brazil.

¶17. (U) President Obama's January 26, 2009, telephone call to President Lula generated significant national press coverage, as did subsequent speculation about when the two men would meet for the first time. Energy and trade were widely cited in the Brazilian media as areas of cooperation in this new period of bilateral relations.

¶18. (U) Coverage of the first weeks of the Obama presidency was a little more subdued, if just as extensive, with many reports noting protectionist elements contained in the "Buy American" provision of the President's economic stimulus plan, as well as Obama's difficulties in securing bipartisan support for this legislation. More recently, press reports and commentary have begun to express frustration at the nature and extent of the measures proposed by the White House: a March 4 editorial in the influential national daily O Estado de Sao Paulo criticized early signs of the Obama administration's trade policy as justifying "fears regarding a more protectionist American policy that is more sensitive to lobbies that support subsidies and barriers." President Obama's call last week to reduce agricultural subsidies gained a more positive reception, however.

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¶19. (U) In recent days, the Brazilian media have speculated about a possible role for Brazil as a "mediator" between the U.S. and Cuba or Venezuela and the major press has reported that President Lula intends to raise issues involving those two countries and Bolivia when he meets with President Obama on March 14.

¶110. (U) In all, Brazilian press coverage of President Obama remains very positive, with perceived protectionism and the possibility that Brazil will be ignored in favor of other, more pressing issues being the main areas of criticism or concern expressed to date.

¶111. (U) In terms of overall public opinion, a CNT/Sensus poll whose results were published in early February showed that 72.8 per cent of the Brazilian population believed that that the election of Barack Obama would be positive for Brazil in the coming years. Only 4.1 per cent considered Obama's election negative for Brazil.

¶112. (U) When asked whether the election of Obama would be positive for the world, 76.6 per cent responded yes, with only 4.5 per cent responding no.

¶113. (U) Anecdotaly, another reflection of Obama's popularity in Brazil was the fact that a number of local political candidates sought to capitalize on the buzz surrounding the 44th U.S. president by being listed on the ballot last October as "Barack Obama."

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